DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 180 598 PS 011 070

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TITLE Parent Power!
PUB DATE Nov 79
NOTE 10p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Atlanta, GA, November 8-11, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Discussion Groups: *Emotional Problems: *Interpersonal Problems: *Parent Attitudes: Parent Counseling: *Parents: *Psychological Needs

ABSTRACT

Parents should admit and articulate their negative feelings about parenting, share feelings of suffering with other parents, and nurture each other. On the basis of a new shared understanding, parents can then organize and work to redefine the nurturing role and humanize society and its institutions so that they better meet human needs. Soell's three stages of suffering can be applied to parental experience: the progression from silent, submissive pain, to articulated pain, and then to shared pain and a feeling of solidarity. (SS)

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PARENT POWER!

Sandy Jones, author of Good Things for Babies and Learning for Little Kids

(Speech for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Annual Conference, November, 1979)

I suppose when you read the title of my talk "Parent Power!" you were reminded as I am of the cries of "Black Power!" that have been a part of the remarkable revolution which is taking place in our country. And perhaps you remember with me Martin Luther King, Jr., the young Atlantan whose charismatic leadership honed the concept of non-violence into a workable formula for shifting the power structures of our society without substantial loss of lives.

Of course, the revolution is far from over. It will continue to go on as long as people are willing to give over a part of their life energies in order to bring about change. That's why I want to talk about "Parent Power". I want to share with you my reflections about what a parenting revolution might be and from where it would arise.

My concern for the state of parents springs originally from my experiencing in a deep way other mothers and babies in a group I formed when all of our babies were about eight months old. That was six years ago. We would meet in people's living rooms every Thursday morning. We all lived somewhat isolated lives... as mothers in the nuclear families of the seventies do. I have never felt so inadequate about trying to lead a group as I did then. It was the negative energy---the suffering--- that kept rearing its head in our sessions, and I didn't know how to deal with it. One sleepless mother, Betty, was so articulate about her anger toward her baby that I became frightened and uneasy. Negative energy is a downer, or so I thought.

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I look back now and I realize that Betty, bless her heart and her courage, was expressing for all of us the anger that we felt, too, but were afraid to allow existence beyond our deepest inner selves. We had these rules inside our heads that said that mothers don't feel anger toward their babies... toward the father is O.K.... but toward the baby, no. And so there were people in the group who would try to disown that anger of Betty's, and yet, in myself, and I sense in the other mothers, there was a deep inner part of ourselves that recognized the truth in what she was saying ... and this part of ourselves was sustained by knowing that we were not alone in the outback part of mothering... the secret inner part of mothering that has a lot of negative energy.

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My experience with that group was the beginning of a long and fruitful journey. The energy for the writing of my first book, Good Things for Babies came directly from it. It was these mothers... through our hashing and bitching and co supporthing... who grounded me. I knew, irrevocably from that point on that the mothering experience is not just an I it is a WE . When I feel something about mothering then I know, because of them, that there are other mothers out there feeling it, too. I became a communicator, and so were to come Learning for Little Kids , many meetings with other parenting groups, and travel this year to 23 cities in America to talk on television and radio about the experience of parenting.

Today I m going to talk about suffering. It's a heavy trip, but I think in the end we're going to see how suffering, how negativity, can provide the groundwork for change and for revolution.

I want to borrow from Heilbrun's book Reinventing Womanhood. She uses the concepts of a theologian named Soelle to classify different forms of suffering. I'm going to apply these stages of suffering to parents. Picture if you will that these levels of suffering are like rungs on a ladder, each step moving the individual to a higher level of awareness.

First, let's look at the nature of suffering. It is a mental state that cuts across class boundaries . The suffering by a group of people initially is an inward thing whether that group is

... defined by skin color

.... defined by the possession of breasts and wombs

... classified by whether or not they have children

The suffering is experienced inside people as a loss of dignity, a loss of a sense of power. It is a blocking of life forces so that even a person's sense of self-worth is affected and thus the engagement with the world outside of the self is profoundly changed.

As a native Southerner, the image of the mute, suffering black man of the forties and early fifties... the glazed eyes, the look of utter,drawn fatigue, the slovenly abandonment of external appearances... these outward signs of inward suffering are not so different from the appearance of the lonely, suffering mother of the seventies... the haggard,single working mother returning at the end of the day on the bus with groceries in one arm and a weeping toddler in the other... the lonely, apartment-dwelling mother in a strange city with no friends, no family, roaming around stores in the mornings for want of human contact.

Heilbrun's first rung is the time of mute, speechless suffering. The sufferer, the parent, or the parenting pair, is unable to organize objectives. It is a time of isolation. Submissiveness... powerlessness... these are the words to describe the posture of one on this rung.

Mothers feel powerless. They are taught and accept the role of submissiveness. They are mute in their suffering. But the reception of the role of powerlessness goes way back in the life of the mother-to-be.

... the training of the girl children to be polite
... the mental shackling of their physical prowess
... passing on the concept that menstruation is shameful or disgusting
... training, unconsciously, that sexual urges are to be denied
... the concept that a woman's pregnancy is a sign or weakness or sin to her but a sign of power for the man who "made" her pregnant.

Couple this dispossession of the self-as-woman with the intercession of the male doctor which force a birthing woman in pain to be still and on her back with her legs up (the posturing of the cowed dog who fears profound violence from her master) and you have the makings of a serious dislocation of the inner workings of the self.

The body is insulted through episiotomies, ceasarians, anesthesias... those insults will heal. But does the insult to the spirit and dignity of the mother heal? And what further soul injuries occur immediately after birth... at the very beginning of parenting... when the powerful, nature-given longings to be close to the baby and to embrace it are denied. The anguishing bonding hours tick by for the empty-armed mother.

What about the father? Trained from early on not to feel

... that he is not to cry or show emotion
... that he's not to have dolls or eliciters that would evoke the tender response
... he's not to play with little girls too much or he might catch their "effeminacy."

In the adult male power realm he is to be tough, and yet to obey his superiors with submission. He is to view his self-worth, not as an intrinsic thing, but as conditional on his earning capacity and his ability to appease others as he works his way up through the system.

Isn't the father's powerlessness simply the other side of the coin from the mothers? Both are marked by the stance of submission, muteness, isolation from fellow human beings.

The father is not the mother's enemy. The father is the co-sufferer with the mother in this dehumanizing society that has evolved.

Let's look at the father at the birthing scene, his initial baptism into parenting. He is just as dispossessed and forced into submission as the mother. "The Doctor knows best." "Here is where you must stand." "You're not sterile enough, you are bringing germs." The institution's arm of power, in this case, the doctor, takes possession of the bodies of the mother and the baby, and by physically excluding the father, takes possession of his body as well. The mother who is meant by all of nature's intent to be bonded to the father and to be baby in this primal moment becomes bonded to the obstetrician instead. (How many of you fell in love with your obstetricians at the moment of birth?)

Given that the father is allowed to experience the birthing, there is a sudden inwash of tenderness that has been buried since childhood. For birthing is an extraordinarily powerful event The father weeps. Later... at home... in his isolation... he struggles to overcome the power of these profound feelings. He is unable to eat or sleep. He works to close back the pandora's box that would tear him so surely from his current definition of himself that he might no longer be able to function as the provider ... the emotionless eunuch who must function as a powerless person in order to earn money.

As for the baby, we have only mildly begun to sense what a crushing blow our form of humanless birthing is to his later sense of trust about life outside of the womb.

The mother and the father with the baby form a tiny, very vulnerable social unit that once it is broken falls prey to the misuse of power by others.

- So industries can create and maintain a freeflowing worker source. The nuclear family can be readily ripped away from its extended support web and tossed from one city to another and there is very little resistance.

- Mothers can be easily convinced by formula companies and physicians aligned with formula companies that the baby doesn't need her breasts anyway and that Similac will do just as well if not better. So the mother-baby bond is further broken and so the mother can go right back to being a nurse, a secretary, or whatever as though nothing had really happened.

- Fathers can adopt an absentee role with their wives and children coming home only to fuel up before going back into the rat race. He is minimally

bonded to his wife and minimally bonded to his offspring.

- The parenting pair can send their children off to school without ever really questioning what's being done to them. In mute isolation, the parents allow the same rigid spirit-breaking techniques to be used on their children that were used on them.

I want to point out that THE GRIEF IS THERE... IT IS JUST NEVER VOICED.

Well, before you loose all hope from my pictures, I want you to look at the second stage of suffering with me. The sufferer becomes aware and is able to speak... to express despair... to analyze what has been happening to himself or to herself. Parents at this stage begin to understand that their suffering is real... that it has real causes beyond the self.

One afternoon a neighbor invited Marcie, then 4-1/2 to spend the night at her house. Something deep within me clutched. I just wasn't sure. Then she explained to me that I probably felt uptight about it. She went on to tell about her son's first experience spending the night out and how she had felt. I trembled inside when at last I articulated the pain to her that I had carried secretly for so long. The fear of separation. To know that another parent felt this way too, that I was not abnormal... that I was not strange for my inner swirling feelings of grief... it was so freeing! That moment of direct honesty enabled us to become the tenderest of friends and co-supporters!

Whether I realized it or not, my suffering, the suffering of the preschool mother was moved in that moment from the mute, powerless rung to the rung of articulated suffering.

All of us who have been involved in parenting groups know of the sometimes terrifying anxiety that one feels when one speaks out of suffering and isolation to the group. It seems like a very dangerous event. To defy the rule of silent pain... to admit that all is not well in those imaginary little cottages with white picket fences in which we mentally place ourselves and our families to show to outsiders... To speak out is to face, straight-on the possibility of being rejected... it is the danger of being excluded in an already very lonely lifestyle.

Last year I was invited to address a group of parents at the Early Childhood Education Center of the New York Public Library. The seats where I was to speak were lined up in rows. What parents expected was what has been done to parents since the fifties. The Authority comes in. The Authority fields questions about the child, as though the child were not a sentient human being with his/her own dignity but a "CASE".

The Authority gives the parent the most recent pat answer. The parent goes home and tries the Answer on her recalcitrant child.

But on this day, I put the chairs in a circle. I spoke to this group of encircling parents not as an Authority but as a mother. And they tested to see if I would play the Authority Game on them by tossing out some questions. But instead, I encouraged them to speak out of themselves... to share their sufferings. There was a palpable silence in the room. They self-consciously eye one another. But then one bold mother speaks of this anguish of hers___she tells of this small baby who has turned her life upside down... who wants to nurse all the time... who won't sleep like he's supposed to... she's exhausted... she's angry.

The group laughed a tense laugh that only lightly covered a feeling nearer to tears. Suddenly, everyone understood so deeply what the mother was feeling. From all sides this courageous mother was confirmed. Her suffering wasn't just her. Everyone was freed a bit from a very heavy secret carried inside... that sometimes being a mother is the pits. A bonding of the group took place immediately. As I watched the mothers leave, I saw that their eyes were sparkling and the coloring had returned to their faces. Their footsteps were lighter and more gingerly... their treatment of their toddlers a little more joyous than when they had come in. It is as if they were saying: "Well, now that I know I'm not alone, I can bear it."

In every group of this kind there will be those mothers and fathers who cannot tolerate looking into painful feelings... the pandora's box. They are the ones who will most vociferously demand external programming in order to escape the sense of dis-ease that comes when others are more open than they are able to tolerate. But in spite of the resistance of a few, it is important that we who deal with parents do not hold them onto the rung of powerless submission. The quickest way that a leader or teacher can shunt parents into the realm of mute, isolated suffering is by refusing to admit that he/she is a parent and that he/she has suffered.

It is out of the co-sharing that later organizations spring up to change society. For example, the roots of La Leche League, an organization that has powerfully influenced hundreds of thousands of mothers to nurse their babies began with just two mothers breastfeeding their babies at a picnic. These two felt rather isolated from the rest of the group because all of the other mothers were busily fixing bottles for their babies.

Something happened that broke that isolation. Mothers one-by-one came to where these mothers were sitting to share their breastfeeding failure stories. It was on that day, that a sudden insight happened. As one of the breastfeeding mothers states: "That's when it really hit us that the problems we had in trying to nurse our babies were common to alot of mothers. . . it wasn't just Mary's paricular RARE problem, or my particular RARE problem." Then and there the decision was made between the two of them to DO something. . . to help other mothers succeed in breastfeeding.

THIS IS THE CRUCIAL MOMENT. . . when energy is transformed from the cyclical, hopeless, isolated suffering marked by passivity to the realization, as Buber would say, of the OTHER. . . the Other Sufferer. . . several other sufferers. . . a nation of sufferers.

It is at this moment, the seeing of the others, that the choice stands clear. A person may choose to continue on the rung of submissive suffering. . . decide to continue to be an I, OR, the person can decide to break out of lonely, inarticulated suffering to become a WE. It seems to me that it is important that at this moment there is another to who agrees to also take the risk. Then, and only then can a third stage emerge: the sufferers gain a solidarity toward the conquest of powerlessness.

I am reminded of Chaevsky's almost insane newsman in the movie "Network" who takes that risk of going out on the cutting edge of alot of people s mute suffering and screams into the t v camera: "If you believe like I do, then go yell out your windows. . . 'I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!'" Then we see windows flying up all over the city and hear formerly silent voices joinging others for a great outburst.

(Of course, what would follow would be the formation of an "I'm Mad As Hell Society" that begins as local and then spreads living room-to-livingroom. Mimeograph machines begin to churn out newsletters, sources for funding and fulltime staff members are explored. . . industry or government attempts to co-opt the goals of the group. . . the group finds itself embroiled in internal debate and splintering because not everyone can agree on what makes them mad-as-hell. Even with struggles for leadership and in-group controversies some constructive changes are brought about. . . and those who formerly in isolation now have a reference group that affects how they view themselves and their external reality.)

But let's go back to our parents. We've traced suffering from its mute stage to its articulation, to the coming together of sufferers for the conquest of powerlessness. Where are parents, for the most part, in this framework? My sensing is that they are still caught on the first rung.

Granted, there are groups that are breaking forth and working on particular areas that concern the welfare of parents and children. There's Action for Child Transportation Safety working to bring about Federal Standards for children's car seats. There are parents helping each other in regard to child abuse through Parents Anonymous. Groups have been formed with parents of retarded, seriously ill or disabled children. Finally, there are mant groups formed for the purpose of teaching parents such as Parent Effectiveness Training or birthing education groups.

I would like to propose a grassroots organization to meet in living rooms primarily for the purpose of providing parents a way to nu ture and support one another. My feeling is that the prime need for parents of the 70's and 80's is NURTURANCE. Mothers need mothering. Fathers need fathering. Parents are saying: "How can you expect me to love my children when I'm so fragmented, so frustrated by society, so stressed?" Even mothers and fathers who seem to be performing expertly in all other areas of their lives are blocked by guilt and uncertainty when it comes to fulfilling their parenting roles.

It might just happen that these small, parent run support groups would come up with a new definition of parenting... not parenting defined by Madison Avenue, or by our myriad of Dr. Spocks... but a carefully thought out, realistic sensing of the role and both its negative and positive meanings. I would see a new understanding of the NURTURING ROLE, which is Parent Power in its most basic form. Could parents then gain enough courage and strength to redefine the meanings of human responsiveness for our nation?

It seems to me that many of our primary institutions in America are intent on PROCESSING PEOPLE rather than NURTURING THEM. A parent understands the tremendous value and uniqueness of each child, while our institutions have begun to mass people into stereotypes in order to do things TO them (rather than WITH them). Thus, we all suffer the loss of dignity and self-determination when we become "patients", "first graders", "welfare mothers", or "soldiers". Our current American byline is: "I can't make an exception for you. If I did that then everybody would demand to be an exception." Isn't this what our giant autocracies fear the most? That everyone would demand to be treated as an individual?

What I hope will happen is that parents will organize on behalf of themselves and their children to demand that America's social systems become more effective and more need-meeting. Parents could be the key to humanizing our libraries, our schools, our hospitals, our agencies. It's going to take active assertion on every front by parents who feel securely held by support groups: "We are human beings. We deserve to be heard.

You have an obligation to preserve our dignity. WE ARE PEERS." How many doctors, nurses, teachers or administrators truly believe that parents are their peers? How many people who deal with our children believe that a child is a total human being with full rights and the dignity to be heard or to make choices?

When our institutions fail to meet the needs of the people that they are created to serve, then we have the right and the obligation to form new institutions that do a better job of meeting needs. When an institution denies a person's basic human worth, when it refuses to hear the people that it serves, when, in subtle, or overt ways it overrides the dignity of the individual, when individuals in serving systems define themselves as superior and above being affected by those whom they serve... then we, America's parents and children, ought to set about to demonstrate anew for ourselves and our society what nurturance and love is all about.

Parent Power is still shackled in a form of inner encircling, mute suffering. But isn't there a potent possibility that we might form a new, extended family with each other that could radically change our society? It's going to take individuals... mothers and fathers... across the U.S. who are willing to speak out about what's happening to them and willing to reach a hand across to other parents who are coming behind. Given time and space together, I think it can happen.

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